

LACDMH Partnership Blazes Trail in Geriatric Forensic Psychiatry

By Kathleen Piché, Public Affairs Director



After much planning and support, the first-ever truly collaborative effort to create a medical-legal elective course came to fruition last week at Southwestern Law School. Focusing on issues related to older adults, the elder law class was a partnership between LACDMH, Southwestern Law School, Bet Tzedek Legal Services, UCLA Geropsychiatry, a private practice attorney and retired Judge, Aviva K. Bobb. The fourteen-hour class ran Monday through Thursday, January 4-7, 2016, for 3.5 hours each day. It was an innovative format for Continuing Medical Education Credit.

The purpose of the class was to help students gain a basic understanding of issues facing the elderly and gain knowledge and expertise in addressing issues of testamentary capacity and vulnerability to undue influence. The course provided the following:

1. An overview of key issues in elder law from the perspective of physicians and lawyers, along with sensitivity training in dealing with the elderly;
2. Recognition of capacity issues through the use of a case file and video of a testator who is the subject of a will contest;
3. Preparation and analysis of a Medical Declaration of Capacity; and
4. Development of trial skills for the law student and greater expertise in testifying as an expert witness by the psychiatrists.

The class was taught by Dr. Sarah Gelberd, Medical Director, Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) Older Adult System of Care (OASOC), (who

spearheaded the effort); Janet Morris, a senior attorney at Bet Tzedek Legal Services specializing in elder law; Stewart Levin, an experienced litigator specializing in elder law and abuse; two Geriatric Psychiatrists and faculty members at UCLA (Drs. Aaron Kaufman and Stephen Read); and Judge Aviva Bobb, now retired and the former presiding Judge of Los Angeles County Probate Court. Harriet M. Rolnick, an Associate Dean of SCALE (the 2 year accelerated program at Southwestern) and Associate Professor, was instrumental in the planning and execution of this new course.



Sarah Gelberd, MD, and others envisioned the need for this education and skill training, given the needs of the growing number of older adults being served in Los Angeles County. Dr. Gelberd states “This elective helps to identify, sensitize, and merely begins to fill a gap”.

Law students learned about communication barriers and differences in the fields of law and medicine, while exploring issues of abuse, ethnicity and language. A real-life elder case was recreated for the learning experience. Seven psychiatrists volunteered to serve as expert witnesses and underwent both direct and cross examination by the law students.

The interactions of the psychiatrists and law students were both eye-opening and beneficial. Upon conclusion of the class, students gave the professors and Subject Matter Experts (psychiatrists) “excellent” reviews. The feedback by retired Judge Bobb was educational, enlightening and was rated “outstanding.”

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From left to right: Aaron Kaufman, M.D., Sarah Gelberd, M.D., Janet Morris, J.D., Judge Aviva Bobb, Harriet Rolnick, Stephen Read, M.D., Stewart Levin, J.D. (not pictured)

The Geriatric Psychiatry fellows and DMH Psychiatrists participating in the course have been similarly enthusiastic about their experience and the high educational value perceived.

“This elective helps both psychiatrists and law students better understand the legal system and the special needs of older adults,” said Janet Morris, Director of the Elder Justice Unit at Bet Tzedek.

Randall Espinoza, MD, MPH, Director of the UCLA Geriatric Psychiatry Fellowship Program said, “This course is truly unique among Geriatric Psychiatry Fellowship Training Programs, and from feedback at the annual national AAGP Training Directors Forum, it is clear that we at UCLA are most fortunate and privileged to have this activity which is just not possible at other fellowships. The need for preparation, education and training on the topic of Geriatric Forensic Psychiatry is truly unmet and under-recognized. That LACDMH has the vision and commitment to devote time and resources is indubitably remarkable and magnanimous. Of course, we hope to repeat this activity.”